

Chitra Banerjee's empathetic view of Draupadi as a protagonist in The Palace of Illusions

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It is said that “Whatever is here is found elsewhere. But whatever is not here is nowhere else.” These lines are said for the great epic of India The Mahabharata. The name means “great [story of the] Bharatas.” Bharata was an early ancestor of both the Pandavas and Kauravas who fought each other in a great war, but the word is also used for the Indian race, so the *Mahabharata* Sometimes is referred to as “the great story of India.” The portrayals of women Characters in this epic were left unsatisfied. It wasn't as though the epic didn't have powerful, complex women Characters that affected the action in major ways, for instance, there was the widowed Kunti, mother of Pandavas, who dedicates her life to making sure her sons become kings. There was Gandhari, wife of the sightless Kaurava king, who chooses to blindfold her in marriage, thus relinquishing her power as queen and mother. And most of all, there was Panchali, king Drupad's beautiful daughter, who has the unique distinction of being married to five men at the same time-the five Pandava brothers, the greatest heroes of their time. Panchaali who, some might argue, by her headstrong actions helps to bring about the destruction of the third Age of man. But in some way, they remained shadowy figures, their thoughts and motives mysterious, their emotions portrayed only when they affected the lives of the male heroes, their roles ultimately subservient to those of their fathers or husbands, brothers or sons. Relevant to today's war-torn world, The Palace of Illusions takes us back to a time that is half history, half myth, and wholly Magical. Narrated by Panchaali, the wife of the legendary Pandava brothers in the Mahabharat, the novel gives us a new interpretation of this ancient tale.

Fiercely independent, strong, multi-dimensional, women characters have always stood around in our mythology. Women who stood for their husbands through loyalties and duties, women who stood against their husbands, women who ruled with their head and not their hearts and women who made a difference in the way history was shaped. Draupadi is a heroine who is unpredictable, unwavering and who could also possess the outerity of a traditional Hindu wife. Many see Draupadi as an early feminist because of her fearlessness in admonishing those who harmed her or her family. Draupadi existed in a time when a woman's role was to serve his husband, as Milton said "He for god and she for the God in him" was true in those days. The unique relationship between Draupadi and her husband is what makes her story so exceptional. Draupadi, the wife of the almighty Pandav brothers was anything but a conventional wife; she was smart, bold and would after lead her husband into action. In *The Palace of Illusions*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni attempts to narrate the great Indian epic, Mahabharata, through the eyes of Draupadi, who was also fondly known as Krishna or Paanchali. Draupadi was pretty much confined to have five husbands and the infamous vastraharan in Duryodhana's court. In this novel, Chitra Banerjee sheds light on the lesser known aspects of Draupadi's life. Like how much she loved and adored her brother Dhriti. Fiercely independent with a streak of stubbornness, she was constantly aware how her actions would one day change the course of history. It was love at first sight when she rested her eyes on Karna's statue. Although she gave up this love to protect her brother and fulfill her destiny, she spent the rest of her life regretting this decision and pining for Karna's affection. However, that did not stop her from being a dutiful and loyal wife to her five husbands. She was the one they turned to for advice on governance; her opinion and judgment were highly regarded. She was the brain behind the Palace of Illusions, a place where she developed a sense of belonging like no other, and which was the root cause of the great Kurukshetra. She shared a love hate relationship with her mother-in-law, Kunti. Draupadi was in awe of Kunti's steel of determination, but detested the power she wielded on her sons. There was a subtle ongoing tiff between the two, for Kunti could sense Draupadi's affection for Karna and Draupadi, in turn, was one of the first persons to uncover how Kunti abandoned Karna. It's Draupadi's life story, from her birth through her childhood, dreams, ambitions, and hesitations all through her decidedly sad life till the end. A role she accepts with trepidation and immense discomfort, and grows into ultimately reveling in the knowledge that such a dramatic fate is indeed her destiny. If each of her thought and action was a pearl, then the silver cord that strings Draupadi's life together is Karna. Not any of her husbands, not her brother [what a fine surprising character he turned out to be!]

and neither is her part as a queen, but it starts with Karna very quickly in the story and ends with Karna. Karna as suitor that Draupadi liked and had wanted as her beau, but destiny dictated that she married Arjuna and hence on. Chitra's revealing some of hiding features of Draupadi's life and character like:

1. Draupadi and Kunti's relationship and the typical mother-in-law, daughter-in-law tensions.
2. Her love and devotion to Krishna without understanding the reasons.
3. Her pride in the Palace she gets built according to her whims and fancies.
4. Loving portrayal of how Bheeshma became Bheeshma the hero, an uncle and an object of envy and misunderstanding.
5. The Kurukshetra and the vision she did not want.
6. Of course the grand underlying unrequited love or obsession with Karna.

There are more of such little puzzles and Chitra does a fine job in filling gaps with imagination and brings in dimensional value to Draupadi. It is indeed a page-turner nevertheless, sketching a depth into Draupadi that may or may not have been there. Chitra Banerjee's beautiful portrayal of Draupadi's relationship with Krishna - a mixture of friendship, sibling love, and that of devotion. Dark skinned like Krishna, Draupadi developed a sense a kinship with Him right from her childhood. Whenever her mind wandered into wilderness or when she sought answers for some of life's mysteries, Krishna was the one she turned to. If she wanted to be in happy place, she thought of the times she spent with Krishna, and simply let go of whatever it was that had a firm grip on her. Even during the vastraharan in Duryodhana's Sabha, thoughts of Krishna brought peace and comfort amidst the pandemonium outside. All she had to do was close her eyes, focus on Krishna, and it brought a whole new perspective on the unfortunate incident - she was not the one that was shamed on the fateful day, but shame on everyone else who allowed Duryodhana to cross the boundaries of decency. Quite the skeptic she was, she refused to believe that Krishna was an incarnation of Vishnu. Could someone who took delight in teasing her endlessly and played pranks on her, be God Himself? Yet, there was something magical and mystical about Him that kept drawing her to Him unintentionally. Her mind was too egoistic, but her heart knew better. Ultimately, it was in her devotion to Krishna that she found salvation. Draupadi's fearlessness

and uncompromising nature makes her of great importance in the history of mythological women and of women today.

Work Cited

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